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ABSTRACT

The focus group assessment technique was used to conduct an assessment of continuing education needs of rural women living in or near the Moberly Junior College district. (This technique uses small group interaction to identify responses to a set of questions.) Nine to ten rural women participated in each of two meetings. When a focus group was assembled, the nominal group process was followed to seek answers to questions concerning typical women's feelings toward acquaintances or themselves. Perceptions of needs were written down, posted, and discussed; each woman then prioritized the needs. Obstacles to meeting the needs of rural women were also discussed. Different lists of needs were developed by the two focus groups of rural women--one made up of participants in a free cooking school, the other of participants in University of Missouri Extension Club activities. The focus group technique generated qualitative data that would have been largely missed by other survey methods. The personal contact and public relations information to which participants were exposed were valuable by-products of focus groups. (Lists derived from the two focus groups are included.) (YLB)

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USING NEW METHODS TO DETERMINE CONTINUING EDUCATION NEEDS OF RURAL WOMEN

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USING NEW METHODS TO DETERMINE CONTINUING EDUCATION NEEDS OF RURAL WOMEN

Introduction

The publication of The Feminine Mystique by Betty Friedan in 1963 stirred dormant drives for equality of educational opportunities and career advancement in generations of homebound women. Many new organizations have since been formed which gave momentum and meaning to the rebirth of the women's movement. The National Organization of Women, the Women's Education Action League, the Older Women's League and the Women's Educational Equity Act all moved forward with Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (as ammended by the Equal Employment Act of 1972) to provide women equal opportunities so long denied. Consciousness raising groups became Women's Centers at colleges and universities and legislation was passed funding Displaced Homemaker Centers to help those divorced or widowed move into the work force or to obtain training for better paying jobs. Although much has been accomplished during the past two decades, rural women have remained, to a large extent, untouched by either the Women's Movement or Federal legislation.

All rural persons probably suffer from..."an overall inequity in opportunities and resources related to many quality of life measures in rural areas", (Baumbeier, Derr, and Gage, 1973). As noted by Margolis in the report of the First National Conference on Rural America, April, 1975:

> Rural Americans are not getting their fair share of the federal revenue pie, either in terms of population...or in terms of needs. The inequities...cut across every category and every federal agency of consequence with particular emphasis in HUD, HEW, and DOT.

Further support for this conclusion comes from the National Advisory Council on Women's Educational Programs, which pointed out that program statistics with specific categories for rural women are virtually non-existent. The council then concluded:

> Until the population of rural women which is significant and whose expressed educational needs are many, is identified in data gathered...and until the effect of public spending on the lives of this population is taken into account, rural women and girls will remain invisible... (Clarenbach, 1977).

It seems that "rural women of America have long been a 'forgotten species' left to fend for themselves. Traditionally, they have served as vigorous and indispensible partners in the sustaining of life in rural areas. Their problems and needs, however, have basically gone unnoticed and undocumented--data related to women of rural America and the effects of rural isolation on their lives appear not to exist", (Gardetto, 1979).

At the recent First Conference for Rural Women sponsored by the state of New York's Women's Division, Mary Hait of Hobart, N.Y. made the following statement: "People don't realize that rural wives play as much of a role on the farm as their husbands. Farm wives are total partners, but in a lot of cases they're put down. They're still being treated as housewives raising children--they do all that and 18 hours more."

Project Re-entry at Moberly Junior College in Moberly, Missouri serves a largely rural area of Central Missouri. The goal of the project is to serve the female constituency of the college. In order to serve rural women better, it seemed appropriate to undertake a needs assessment of rural women living in or near the college district. The usual types of need assessment surveys were considered: a mailed questionnaire, a house to house survey, and/or a telephone survey. However, after careful consideration it was decided to borrow a technique from market research known as the focus group assessment technique.

The focus group technique uses small group interaction to identify responses to a set of questions. It is a marketing research tool which utilizes group dynamics to investigate questions, to psychologically analyze respondants' answers,

and to gain a better understanding of their motivations and unique relationships to the product, (in this case the institution, its classes and services). Lacking lists of residents in the rural area surrounding Moberly, project personnel utilized a list of participants at a cooking school sponsored by the local newspaper and a list of members of University of Missouri Extension Homemaker Clubs. Only rural women were chosen. Two meetings were planned.

For each meeting 20 women were pre-selected. Two weeks prior to the scheduled meeting, each would-be participant was mailed a written invitation to participate in the meeting at the Project Re-entry Center at Moberly Junior College. Lunch was served and all participants were invited to tour the college after the meeting. The week of the meeting each participant was called on the telephone and asked if she would be in attendance. In this way we had a rough idea of the number of participants, although a few people who said they would not be able to come did show up and vice versa. Eventually each group had an average of 9 - 10 members.

When a group was assembled, the format followed was the Nominal Group Process.[1] The NGP was used to seek answers to the following questions with respect to a typical woman of her acquaintance or herself.

1. What are her wants and needs?
2. What sort of a woman is she?
3. Where does she expect to be 5 years from now?
4. What skills does she need to develop?
5. What are the obstacles to learning these skills?
6. When would be the best time to learn these skills in a class?
7. How much should it cost?
8. What time of year suits rural people best for outside activities?
9. Do they listen to the radio or read the Moberly newspaper for information which could inform them about these classes?

[1]The Nominal Group Process is a widely used group process where each member of the group lists responses to a question individually. These are then shared and ranked by consensus of the entire group by discussion and individual vote. The advantage of this process is that it controls group pressures for consensus. It also eliminates individual domination of the group by one or two individuals.

After each person individually wrote down her perception of needs, they were posted on a newsprint tablet in front of the group. After a good deal of discussion of each need suggested, they were prioritized on another card by each woman. When these were tabulated we had a list of the needs perceived to be most important ranked by the group.

A break was taken for lunch, provided by Project Re-entry. After lunch, obstacles to meeting the needs of rural women discussed earlier, were listed. After a discussion of the obstacles, solutions were suggested by members of the group. This included size and cost of classes they would be willing to take, time of day and year, and content or type of courses most needed.

When all this information had been listed on the newsprint tablet, both the staff and the participants felt the session was definitely worthwhile. The feeling was expressed that it was certainly hoped something would be done for all rural women in the area and that they had a lot more interest in the college now that they had actually been there.

Everyone was offered a tour of the whole college at the close of the meeting. About half of each group accepted.

Although both focus groups were drawn from women living in rural areas near Moberly, Missouri, one group was made up of participants in University of Missouri Extension Club activities, while the other group was made up of participants in a free cooking school sponsored by the local newspaper. Their lists of needs were different. Although the groups were selected at random from two lists, the groups differed with respect to age and educational background. This may account for the different focus of their needs.

The following lists were derived from the two focus groups of rural women.

FIRST GROUP

Wants

1. To be her own person.
2. To get children established.
3. A secure retirement.
4. To be able to choose priorities.
5. Not to work as hard.
6. To be able to retire by age 35--not working out.
7. Safety with very complex and dangerous machines.
8. To be financially aware--able to take over in case of death of husband.

Other needs not in top list

1. Estate planning.
2. Political action on rural women's estate problems.
3. Knowledge of Business law so that they are able to understand legal documents.
4. Knowledge of agri-mechanics--instruction in operation and precautionary measures.
5. Confidence in self as capable of making decisions.
6. Management skills (computer, keeping books).

SECOND GROUP

Wants

1. Part-time work with flexible hours (job sharing or time sharing).
2. Job information for middle-aged and older women.
3. Direct contact with information sources about educational opportunities--Moberly Junior College publicity, information at libraries, extension center, etc.
4. Group transportation for classes--van or carpooling with a local coordinator or phone number.
5. Block scheduling of classes during the daytime.

Other needs not in top list

1. Human relations skill training to help on the job.
2. Survey of area employers for job development.
3. More business knowledge.
4. How to adjust to widowhood.
5. Work more closely with extension.
6. Refresher course in bookkeeping.
7. Turn hobbies into a paid job.
8. Learning to drive with other adults.
9. Companionship.
10. Familiarity with Moberly Junior College.
11. Better parking.
12. Creation of new volunteer opportunities.
13. Child care.
14. Information about appropriate dress on the job.
15. Self-esteem and confidence.
16. Concern network--visitation for older people and widows.

Obstacles

1. Child care.
2. Consideration of distances (carpool, weather).
3. Lack of information.
4. Time of year.
   A. In winter there is spare time.
   B. In summer there is no time for classes or even recreation.
5. Awareness of men to needs.

Obstacles

1. Lack of transportation.
2. Employer attitudes.
3. Don't take Moberly paper.
4. Husband's schedule (he is home at night when classes are offered).
5. Timidity.

Solutions

1. Estate planning class for rural women.
2. Safety and agri-mechanical class (week-end).
3. Bookkeeping for farmers.
4. Computer management.
5. Combating rural crime.

Solutions

1. Survey of area employers to ascertain needs and educate them about older, returning workers.
2. Resource persons in each outlying community.
3. Use extension newsletter for information dissemination.
4. Develop carpools in each community with one contact person.
5. Schedule courses during mid-day (10 - 2).

Criteria of class they would be willing to attend

1. Cost - $15 - $25.
2. Be well organized.
3. No college credit.
4. Not waste your time.
5. Make you feel welcome (coffee, etc.).
6. Student participation in planning curriculum.
7. Geared to common terms (no unfamiliar jargon; high school level).
8. Lots of interaction in class.
9. Best time--January, February, March--mornings at 10:00.

Quotes

1. "I always intended to marry a farmer, and I did."
2. "Everyone of us needs time for ourselves. I have things I want to do, just for myself."
3. "In winter I have time to bowl, but when planting time comes, I forget it."
4. "I was never in debt in my life until I came from the city and married a farmer."
5. "We are our own boss. If we do it, it gets done; if we don't, it doesn't."
6. "My husband came with me to a night class I wanted to take. He would go to the show or just wait. He was afraid for me to come alone."
7. "I'd love a class on the history of Monroe County."

Quotes (continued)

8. "You think you'll never be a widow. I don't know how I could handle it. Widows don't stay on the farm unless their children live nearby."
9. "We never hear about classes at Moberly Junior College. Why don't they publicize them?"
10. "I have a nice job; I work for the church. What they pay me doesn't do more than cover my gasoline, but it's nice to have to come to town part-time."
11. "I really need to learn to drive. I pay my brother-in-law, who brings me when I need to come. I guess I'll learn when I lose my husband." (suggestion--have him teach you.) "Oh heavens, no; he'd have a fit if I didn't do it just right. He'd never forgive me if I put a dent in his car."
12. "If the drought continues I guess a lot of us farm women will be looking for jobs in town."
13. "It's hard for older women to get jobs other than emptying bed pans or being a waitress...men want to hire younger women."
14. "Night courses sound interesting, but I wouldn't come to Moberly by myself."

Summary and Conclusion

The use of the focus group technique to assess needs of rural women in a community college district was a fruitful effort in several ways. The qualitative data which resulted from this small group process produced information which would have been largely missed by other survey methods. Although hard data is not collected, the personal contact and public relations information participants are exposed to are valuable by-products of focus groups.

The list of rural women generated for this needs assessment has been used to publicize courses and programs which the college is offering this fall. Several were based on information gained in the survey. The personal one-to-one interaction of the focus groups established feelings of rapport and concern which were missing in dealings between the college and this new constituency.

Rural women have very unique continuing education needs. Their participation may be seasonal and at certain times of the day or week. It is definitely based on a different time frame from in-town students or clients. Although the extension service of land grant universities offers many services to rural residents, there are still others that community colleges can and should address. There are advantages which can accrue to both participants and the institution from such expanded services.

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